



SHOME BASU:

CONFLICT-TORN

enO RISKING LIFE AND LIMB TO TELL "THE STORIES THAT MATTER."

By Christy Rippel



PHOTOS © SHOME BASU

Hazratbal mosque in Kashmir.

In 2009, *The New York Times* Lens blog highlighted the dangers to photographers in Afghanistan, with writer James Estrin saying, "Covering Afghanistan is an extremely dangerous assignment for any photojournalist—avoiding ambushes, snipers, roadside bombs and kidnappings take priority over taking photographs."

Why would anyone rush to a country that so many are fleeing? For Shome Basu, it's about curiosity and, above all, an unwavering commitment to covering the stories that matter most.

Some people thrive on conflict. Basu, a photographer based in New Delhi, India, is a self-described conflict photographer—after the fighting is over, he goes in to document what's been left behind; or, more accurately, the people who've been left behind.

Take his trip to Afghanistan in 2002, immediately after the Taliban was overthrown. As soon as flights were allowed into the unstable country, Basu booked a ticket to Kabul. "I wanted to see what it looked like," he says. "I went in without an idea of the story that I wanted to do, but it was a great experience."

While he saw what the conflict had done to the country, what he remembers most from his time there is the humanity of its people. A few experiences stick out in his mind: The first occurred when he was shopping at the outdoor food market. Basu, who speaks Bengali, Hindi and English, couldn't speak Dari, the native language. As he attempted to communicate with the street vendor who told him his bill totaled 400,000, he began to panic.



On the streets of Kabul.

"I had no idea how much that was, and if I had enough. But my friend translated it for me, and it was only four dollars," remembers Basu.

He handed the man five dollars and told him to keep it. The street vendor began enthusiastically hugging him. It was incredible to Basu that after everything this man had been through, one extra dollar could change his mood to pure joy.

On another day during this same trip, Basu made his way through the streets with his camera in hand and came across a group of children who were staring at the meat displayed in a shop window. The children were clearly starving, and Basu couldn't bring himself to photograph them. Instead he went into the shop and bought some food for the kids, eliciting cheers of happiness from them. It was a reminder that so many people in the war-torn nation were lacking very basic necessities.

Though Basu is a seasoned conflict photographer, it's the ability to connect with his subjects that lends the emotional left to his images. So one can't help but wonder, does the suffering that he sees so up



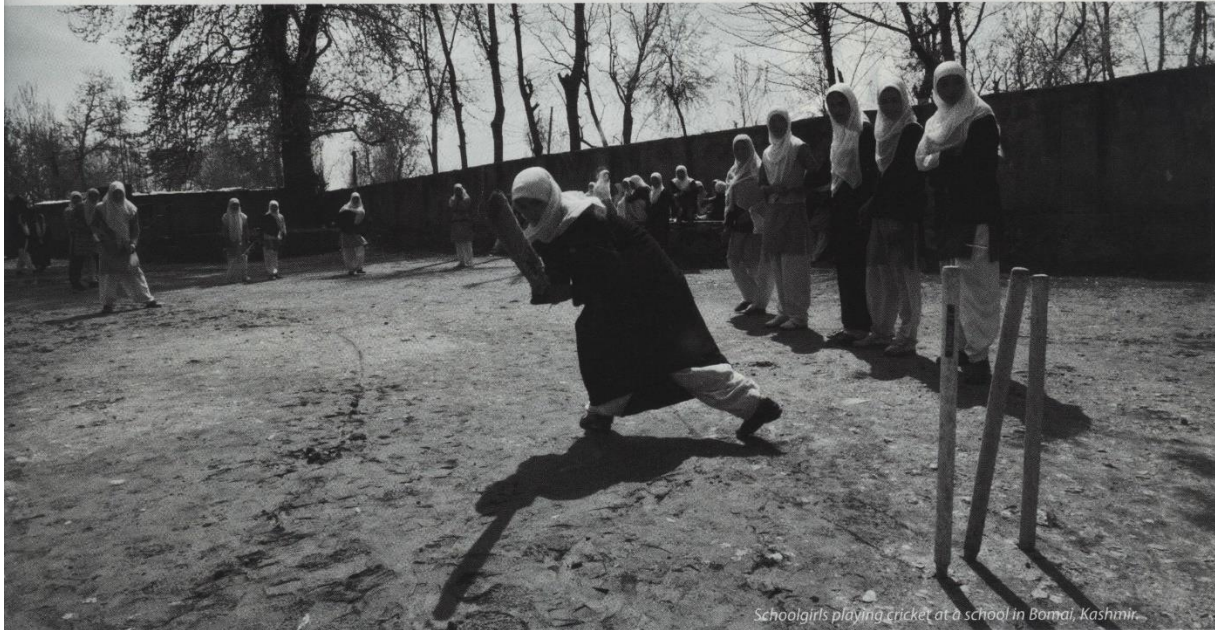
Afghan boy selling souvenirs to survive.

close stick with him? Can he forget the hungry children outside the shop, staring up at him with vacant eyes?

"It can become a bit tough for me at times," he admits. "I don't realize it as much

when I'm actually shooting, when I'm in the moment. Later, when I'm back at the hotel and thinking about it over a drink or something, it can be pretty heart wrenching. I had Kabul on my mind for days."

SHOME BASU



Schoolgirls playing cricket at a school in Baramulla, Kashmir.

However, it isn't only emotional damage that Basu has to contend with—he's also been physically injured in the name of the job. He's been grazed by a few bullets, but last year endured a more serious injury. He was documenting a protest in Kashmir when people began throwing stones. Though he usually wears a bulletproof vest and helmet, he was without these on this particular day when he was hit with a stone and fell to the pavement, head first. Luckily, police were on the scene and loaded him into a vehicle and drove him to the hospital. A day later, he was back to shooting, sporting a significant head wound.

Basu didn't let his injury stop him, and he doesn't place any blame on those who caused his injury. "I think it just happened by chance," he says. "The people throwing stones—they were doing their own jobs—I was just chronicling the moment."

Injury, Basu says, is part of the job—a job he loves doing and wouldn't trade for anything. And he found someone to share life who is equally intent on telling the world's stories. His wife, Nayanima, is a journalist, and she and Basu have had the chance to collaborate professionally—she drafts the words, he shoots the pictures. "We like to work together and it is always great to travel together. We understand

each other's vibrations," Basu says.

As for how he documents stories, Basu says the make of camera he's holding isn't important ("It's like a pen to a journalist," he says), but it is vital that he not distort his subjects in any way. "I want to show the world that what I'm seeing is the reality," he says. "There shouldn't be any gimmick." He uses a lot of different cameras, but favors a 35mm lens. Though he doesn't define himself as a black-and-white photographer, he says most of what he wants to show can be shown better in black-and-white images.

While his injury certainly lent an element of danger and excitement to his assignment last year, it surprisingly doesn't take the cake for most challenging and frustrating shoot to date. That distinction goes to an assignment at a Kashmir school.

"In some places [like Kashmir] you aren't allowed to [photograph] women," he explains. "It took two years for me to get the permissions to shoot, and at end of all that, I was only allowed to shoot for 15 minutes, because the principal of the school came running out saying 'we don't like you shooting the girls here.'"

Besides the risks inherent in Basu's job, he acknowledges that it is also more difficult for photographers to earn a living, though he thinks it is easier in India than in the United

States (print media isn't evaporating at the same rate in India as it is in America). That leaves more assignments for Basu, who has always been a freelancer. He enjoys the variability of assignments, and the chance to set his own priorities and schedule.

Basu says that to have success, photographers must choose what they really want to do, and, frankly, they must be the best, because competition is high.

While he believes earning a good living is still possible for photographers, he is diversifying with books and other photo projects. Basu's book efforts include one on his work in Kashmir, and one on the various religions of his home country. His solo show, *As I See*, was exhibited at the Visual Arts Gallery in New Delhi's India Habitat Centre in July 2011.

While he cultivates his other projects, you can bet that Basu has an ear to the ground, and that when conflict breaks out, he'll be ready to grab his camera and hop a plane.

To learn more about Basu's work, visit shomebasu.photoshelter.com. **RF**

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